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C O N F I D E N T I A L LAGOS 000192

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TAGS: [PINR](#) [EPET](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NEW YEAR OFFERS NO REPRIEVE FROM DELTA VIOLENCE

REF: 2003 LAGOS 2193

Classified By: R. HINSON-JONES FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

[11](#). (SBU) SUMMARY. The New Year has so far offered Nigeria's Delta region little reprieve from the violence that marked [12003](#). Recent incidents reflect heightened tensions in the Warri area, and ethnic clashes remain a constant possibility. While it was hoped that attempts at dialogue between the warring groups would sow seeds of promise, the Ijaws and the Itsekiris are each becoming factionalized internally and leaders are finding it difficult to reign in the disaffected. The Urhobo may also become more violent. END SUMMARY.

[12](#). (SBU) On January 8, a group of Itsekiri attacked boats carrying Ijaw traveling to a local market. Newspapers reported 18 deaths, and private security consultants in the Warri area told us it was likely that at least 10 Ijaw were killed. As usual, details remain largely uncorroborated, as reports from the area are sketchy, contradictory, and prone to exaggeration. For example, an Itsekiri activist group issued a press release soon after the incident describing a nearly reverse-image of what now appears to be the truth; the group claimed that Ijaw militants in speed boats attacked and killed 18 Itsekiri returning home from a celebration. All other sources indicate an Itsekiri militant youth group named the Gallant Boys killed Ijaw villagers. The Gallant Boys, ostensibly operating independently, had not been known for violent attacks prior to this incident. Ijaw leaders have appealed for calm and claim they will refrain from a retaliatory attack, unless further provoked. In a separate incident, Ijaw activists held a press conference on January 13 stating that a group of Itsekiri attacked an Ijaw boat and kidnapped an Ijaw traditional chief.

[13](#). (U) Over the weekend of January 17, ethnic Itsekiri from the village of Obonti reportedly clashed with ethnic Urhobo from the neighboring village of Ugbokurusu located outside Sapele. No deaths have been reported. The two communities have been fighting since 1999 over a nearby oil well. In 2001 the Urhobo attacked Obonti, so this recent attack by the Itsekiri may have been in retaliation. An Itsekiri youth leader disappointed with the violence told us he believes that the dispute had already been settled, and questioned whether Itsekiri elders failed in not resolving the issue through dialogue earlier. The youth reported that leaders have condemned the attack and called for calm, highlighting the Itsekiri's gratefulness to the Urhobo who help shelter thousands of displaced Itsekiris around Sapele.

[14](#). (C) Dennis Amachree, security manager for Halliburton, reported that tension has increased, with a risk that further clashes between these groups could spread along the main highway between Warri and Benin City. Thousands of Itsekiri displaced by violence from their villages in the riverine area of the Delta have been living for the past year in and around Sapele, which is largely an Urhobo community. This situation differs from that of the past several months in that an outbreak of violence in Sapele, a modestly developed town connected to the outside world by roads, power and telecommunications, could spread far more quickly than clashes occurring in villages isolated deep in the swamps.

[15](#). (U) On January 15, soldiers assigned to Joint Task Force Operation Restore Hope reportedly engaged militant Ijaw youth in a gun battle while conducting a "cordon and search" operation in the village of Bomadi. One of the tasks of security forces in the Delta is to disarm the warring ethnic factions, which the Task Force tries to do by means of occasional village-level sweeps and house-to-house searches. Newspaper accounts quoted Bomadi residents as saying 10 militants were killed during the January 15 incident, while a military spokesman was quoted as saying one militant and one soldier were killed.

[16](#). (SBU) COMMENT: These latest incidents may indicate a new boldness on the part of the Itsekiri, who told Mission staff several months ago that they were growing increasingly resentful of being displaced from their homes and would return to what they consider their traditional lands by whatever means necessary (reftel). The Gallant Boys may be driving this new wave of violence; if so, it may signify the emergence of greater factionalization amongst the Itsekiri. Should the Itsekiri around Sapele clash more frequently with

their neighbors, we are likely to see more militancy among the Urhobo, who, of the three ethnic groups vying for power and representation in the Delta, have thus far been the least involved in violence. END COMMENT.
HINSON-JONES